

ROSH HASHONAH DVAR - SEPTEMBER 2007

L'Shanah tovah. It's my pleasure and honor to have been asked to speak to you today. Actually, it would be a little more of an honor if I'd been asked to give the dvar before my 26-year-old son Sam was asked, two years ago, but who's complaining?

Really, it is an honor, and it's also humbling to be here with you as President of this vibrant, secular, progressive Jewish communal organization. Today I want to talk with you about some things that we've been doing, that I think are important, and that have been particularly meaningful for me on a personal level.

Six years ago, many of us gathered together for our Rosh Hashanah observance, in a state of shock and grief, as we tried to process the enormity of the World Trade Center tragedy that had happened only a few days before. We cried together, and shared our trauma, our fears, and our concerns about what would happen next, including how the powers that be would respond.

Six years later, the aftermath is everywhere, still playing itself out. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo, Europe and the Middle East, here at home, the reverberations are all around us. Some of our worst fears about how our government might respond have, tragically, been realized.

Meanwhile, we're bombarded with warnings that Bin Laden is still at large, Al Qaeda is retooling, and Iran is nuclearizing. Yes, there are causes for concern, and they need to be addressed. The question is how. And how we address these concerns very much depends on the lens we use to examine them. If the lens is cut to focus on the themes we stress here today, as we contemplate our understanding of the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, then certain solutions appear. If, on the other hand, the lens is tinted so that every concern is seen as reflecting, for example, the threat of global jihad, then other, more dire approaches are required.

That's the context in which Workmen's Circle, about a year and a half ago, found itself drawn into the fray that was the Boston mosque lawsuit. In a nutshell, the Boston Herald and FOX News began in late 2003 to publish stories charging that some leaders of the Islamic Society of Boston ("ISB"), the religious organization that had begun to build the largest mosque in New

England, had links to terrorist groups and had made anti-Semitic statements. One TV report published a picture of Osama bin Laden juxtaposed against an image of the proposed mosque. When this coverage continued unabated, the ISB filed a lawsuit charging civil rights violations and defamation, against Fox and the Herald, and also against the David Project, a pro-Israel advocacy group, that, the ISB claimed, had played a key role in promoting this image of the ISB as a terrorist-related organization.

Workmen's Circle began to get involved after the Combined Jewish Philanthropies and the Jewish Community Relations Council ("JCRC") took out an ad explicitly supporting the David Project, and after they commented to the effect that as long as the lawsuits continued, communications between the organized Jewish and Muslim communities would be put on hold. Many of us, led by our Middle East Working Group, viewed that freeze of dialogue as unacceptable, and were determined to do something about it.

We met with ISB members, and with JCRC leadership. We began discussions with our Board about taking action, and we educated ourselves about the issues. Then, in January of this year, the ISB's lawyer approached us and asked if we, a Jewish group, would sign on to a brief supporting the ISB's right to bring its lawsuit. We took the request very seriously, and hosted a forum where lawyers for both sides presented. Following that forum, the Board deliberated for hours. We wondered: how can we most effectively make a difference, and be a voice across the divide? After much soul-searching, we decided, first and foremost, that this hostile litigation had gone on for too long. We decided that we needed to help bring it to an end. And so, we issued a Call for Mediation.

Not surprisingly, the ISB immediately accepted our Call. It had previously expressed interest in trying for peace. The David Project, however, declined. We thought hard again about how we could make this work, and we decided to enlist public support for the Call in the effort to urge the David Project to the mediation table. We wrote op-eds, we spoke on the radio, we gathered signatures, and with the help of young rabbinical students, activists in several congregations, and many others, we began to build momentum to end the lawsuits.

A key event happened in early April, on Good Friday, when we hosted a small gathering of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lay leaders and clergy. Dr. Walid Fitaihi, a Saudi Arabian doctor and ISB trustee, had requested a

chance to apologize for anti-Semitic statements quoted in the Arabic press several years ago. He came, we listened, and then we spoke together. The gathering was, for me and others, a meaningful sharing of thoughts and feelings; the group acknowledged that wounds had been inflicted on both sides, and sorely needed healing. And I should note: a David Project board member, whom I had met and had begun to speak with about these issues at the American Jewish Committee Diplomat's Seder a week before, was one of those present.

Several weeks later the lawsuits were dropped by both sides. The ISB had hoped to issue a joint press release with the David Project, but the David project declined, and instead declared victory.

A few weeks later, the Islamic Society of Boston and the Muslim American Society hosted, at the almost-completed mosque, an Intercommunity Solidarity Day. It was attended by an array of political and religious figures; leaders of most of the large mainstream Jewish organizations, though, were conspicuously absent. Workmen's Circle's Yiddish chorus offered the song Peace, Salaam, Shalom, and I was one of several Jews honored to be asked to help plant a Tree of Peace.

There's no question that many factors were at play in the ending of the lawsuits. But what mattered, maybe as much as anything, was that we, and other Jewish activists, rabbis, and organizations felt passionately that what we need to build between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Boston are bridges, and not barriers. We had said firmly that while some elements in the Jewish community might push to embargo communication with the Muslim community, we weren't buying. We had clearly expressed an absolute commitment to dialogue, and we had begun to put it into practice. This meant a great deal to our friends and colleagues in the Muslim community, and they were generous in their expressions of appreciation.

And now, a brief diversion: Fast forward to the first WC trip to Israel/Palestine, a memorable journey that fourteen of us took just a few weeks ago. During our ten days in Israel and four days in the West Bank we met with individuals and representatives of at least a dozen organizations, from the PLO's Negotiations Support Unit in Ramallah to the U.N.'s Humanitarian Affairs office at the D'heisheh Refugee Camp, to the Geneva Initiative's director of foreign relations, to a series of social action NGOs in Haifa and Galilee. We visited Yad Vashem, the eloquent memorial to those

lost in the Holocaust, and compelling reminder of the horrors of the too-recent past; we visited kibbutzim, floated in the Dead Sea, hiked Masada at dawn, toured Hebron with a Palestinian journalist, and monitored checkpoints from Nablus to Qalqilya.

We also met with the mayor of Ariel, a major Jewish settlement extending deep into the occupied West Bank. Like the claims of other settlers in the West Bank, Ariel's claim to the land originates not from international law but from the Bible. Among Ariel's primary supporters are a raft of Christian Evangelicals, including Pastor John Hagee's Christians United For Israel. The settlement's promotional magazine, "Shalom Ariel" says that Hagee and Ariel's mayor "have a great deal in common, particularly as regards the threat of Islam and a deep and abiding love of Israel." What's interesting about Hagee's love of Israel is its theological basis. He and other like-minded evangelicals believe that both Israel and its destruction are necessary for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (including the killing of most of its Jews, except those who convert before Jesus returns). When Jesus returns, believers will be raptured to heaven. All this might be innocuous enough, except that Christians United for Israel have enlisted such notables as Tom Delay and Rick Santorum to lobby against any peace agreement in which "even one centimeter" of the West Bank is given up to the Palestinians. You couldn't make this stuff up. And yet this is at least some of what goes into American foreign policy. Scary.

Finally, we visited, many times in many places, the Wall, known to some as the security fence, and to others as the separation wall, the stark and ugly reminder that good fences do not good neighbors make.

We heard so many narratives, some hopeless, some optimistic, some simply resigned to whatever will happen. But many were also inspiring. I offer just a few:

Rachel Heiblum: a small, self-effacing 60-ish Jewish Israeli who took some of us on a machsom (checkpoint) watch; the mother of two sons who served in the Israeli Defense Force, and the wife of a staunchly atheist holocaust survivor, she ventures each week to several checkpoints, to monitor the delays they cause and, with unassuming charm and equanimity, chats with soldiers and Arabs alike, and does what she can to release some of the pressure that these checkpoints generate, day in and day out

Issa Suf: a non-violent Palestinian activist and father of young children; paralyzed from the waist down after being shot by soldiers during a demonstration in 2001; calm and dignified and with not an ounce of rancor, he welcomes us into his home, serves us tea, speaks of his sympathy for the young soldier who shot him, and of his hopes for peace with justice for all people of the region

Fatima, the courageous director of Women for Life, located in a small village near Nablus; she works for girls' and women's empowerment, even in the face of hostile religious fundamentalists, and, with the barest of resources, teaches the use of song and dance as means to create hope and joy where it's often otherwise hard to find.

These were just a few of the remarkable people we met, each facing "the facts on the ground" with dignity and humanity and grace. People from whom we can draw inspiration for our work here at home. People who view their world through the lens of empathy, compassion, humanism, and hope. And who act accordingly.

Back to our corner of the world. Follow-up on the Call for Mediation: Our work in coalition-building, during and after the end of the mosque disputes, has just now borne large fruit: a few days ago we rolled out, in time for Rosh Hashanah and the first day of Ramadan, a joint Jewish-Muslim public statement called Building a Community of Trust. Crafted together by a committee of Jews and Muslims, it's a statement that embraces the diversity of our community, affirms our common humanity, and expressly supports dialogue and a commitment to address disagreements and community concerns in ways that promote reconciliation rather than conflict. It's signed by Muslim leaders of every prominent local Muslim institution, and is being sent to every area mosque. On the Jewish side, things weren't quite so smooth. Resistance to the statement was brought to bear; a story about the statement in yesterday's Globe notes the David Project's opposition to it. Despite the opposition, the Mass Board of Rabbis has endorsed it, along with a number of lay leaders of the big mainstream organizations, and us.

So, in many ways the work is just beginning. It won't be a cakewalk. We'll be challenged by the David Project; we might be challenged by comparable elements in the Muslim community. The dialogue work itself will often test each of our abilities to really listen and to understand.

The goal is to build deep, honest, and respectful relationships between our Jewish and Muslim communities here in Boston. It's going to be about taking down the walls between us, brick by brick, learning about one another, and building lasting relationships as players in the civic life of Boston, and as human beings on the world stage. It's about choosing the lens of hope, and not fear.

It's something I know we can do.

Michael Felsen
September 13, 2007